Towards Developmental ELT Supervision

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It has long been established that a lot needs to-and can be-done to improve teachers' classroom performance, and most educators would agree on the value of assessing teacher performance with a view to improving it. Yet, my experience as both a teacher and a supervisor of English Language (EL) in the Ministry of Education in Jordan has shown me that somewhere in the chain of education the link between the theory and its actual practice is broken. Both parties in the process, teachers and supervisors alike, tend to see supervision as clerical work, the main aim of which is to label teachers as "good" or "bad," thus opening the way to promotion or reprimand, and the formative aspect is, to a great extent, left aside. The rupture seems to go so deep that supervisors are perceived by teachers as "potentially dangerous" (Blumberg 1980:20) and a book on the subject is titled Supervisors and Teachers: A Private Cold War (Blumberg 1980).

Solutions that Could but Do Not Work: Why?

The problem has been spotted, and many suggestions have been made to improve what is called the "supervisory dialogue": extensive supervisor-training programmes have been devised; supervisors have been warned against essentialism, that is, against having a narrow list of "desirable characteristics" of "the good teacher"; and, instead, they have been offered a range of observation schedules for a variety of different language-teaching situations. In short, supervisors have been provided with all the necessary "how to" formulae.

Yet, supervision is not an exact science; there can be no presumptive formulae for "good supervision." Whatever the assumption, the outcome of the supervisory process is mainly determined by the situational and contextual influences on the performance and effectiveness of the individual supervisor. However well-qualified and competent the supervisor might be, and whatever goodwill and enthusiasm he may have for his job, he will soon find that he has to compromise. Let us consider as an example a newly appointed supervisor in a Ministry of Education in a country with limited resources: Our new supervisor has gone through a brief training programme-something like two days-where he has been lectured about the golden rules of supervision; he now wants to expunge his disbelief in supervision, a reminiscence of his days as a teacher. He has envisaged that he will get to know each of his teachers individually and allocate several hours a week for each teacher. When he starts working, our supervisor is disheartened to find that he has 80-110 teachers to supervise in 100-110 days of actual teaching in a semester. He realises that the best he can do is to visit each teacher twice in a semester -just as it is stated in the regulations. In addition to these class visits, he is to organise in-service training courses, plenaries, and workshops for his teachers, and counsel them, both individually and in groups, about the curriculum and the implementation of the textbook(s) for all levels.

Our Atlas, holding upon his enfeebled shoulders all this responsibility, as well as the burden of the ensuing bureaucratic formalities, ends up visiting a teacher hardly once a semester and

always in a rush. If he deems that teacher A gave a good class, then teacher A simply gets a good report.

Now, if teacher A is not only competent but also enthusiastic about self-improvement, he will benefit from the supervisor's hasty remarks about his teaching. The in-service training programmes also will provide him with a good opportunity to improve his teaching. Even if he does not have access to current literature on the profession, these programmes and workshops will update his knowledge to a certain extent.

However, if teacher A happens to lack the competence necessary for English language teaching-for example, if his English is not of a good standard, which is the case with many teachers-he will be given a bad report, and maybe even a reprimand, and that is all. The supervisor will tell him that, for example, his English needs improvement, or that he should try to make his classes livelier. But then, teacher A has been given similar bad reports before, and he is still kept as a teacher, is he not?

This lack of commitment cannot be overcome by in-service training programmes only; much more is needed. The teacher needs to be shown, individually, how he can improve his teaching.

An obvious solution, of course, is to decrease the supervisor's load. Taking for granted that the supervisor himself is committed to his work, I would argue that his supervision will be of better quality when he has to supervise 30 or fewer teachers. Then he can establish an intimate dialogue with each teacher; and, aware of each teacher's individual characteristics, he can work his way towards improving the positive teaching traits, and modifying or eliminating the negative ones.

The planners in the Ministry of Education our supervisor works for are naturally aware of this solution, but the financial difficulties they face make it impossible for them to allocate a supervisor for such a small number of teachers.

More feasible solutions have also been implemented. In Jordan, for example, the Ministry of Education considers the headmaster in each school a resident supervisor. His task is to constantly observe teachers and help the supervisor(s) in their work. The ministry would require the headmaster to regularly attend the classes of each teacher at least once or twice a semester and document his visit in a special record. This does not seem to be a real solution to the problem of English language teaching, because a supervisor has to be a specialist and a headmaster cannot be expected to function as jack-of-all-trades who can supervise teachers of all disciplines. A headmaster may observe and judge class management, but would naturally fail to assess a teacher's technical skills.

Eventually, the solution has to come from inside the English language teaching profession.

A New Look at Peer Evaluation: Unit Heads as Assistant Supervisors

I wholeheartedly agree with the argument that "it is in the best interests of all teachers to take an active role in the . . . evaluation process, as part of their own development as teachers and as part

of their contribution to the development of the profession" (Pennington 1989:178). Once teachers feel that they are "being treated as a 'partner' in the supervisory process," communication and collaboration will come naturally (Wallace and Woolger 1991:327).

The implementation of peer evaluation in small academic units specialising in language education has been proposed, but not yet fully explored (Pennington 1989). My suggestion is to employ peer evaluation in a larger context and allow talented teachers in primary and secondary schools to participate actively in the supervisory process. One way of doing this is to restore what might be called the "caste system" in staff organisation in schools, whereby a gifted teacher, promoted by the supervisor to the rank of a "unit head," plays an active role in the improvement of his colleagues' teaching.

Each unit should have no more than 10 teachers. For small schools with only one English language teacher, a unit head can be assigned for two or three schools nearby.

The unit head will be chosen on the merit of professional competence and motivation, not on the grounds of deceptive "seniority" based on the number of years of experience, which is usually-and falsely -taken as a proof of a teacher's competence. The supervisor will choose a head from among the teachers in a unit after carefully examining their academic and professional backgrounds, as well as their personal characteristics. If he finds that none of the teachers in a certain school is suitable for the position, he will arrange for a talented and competent teacher to be transferred from elsewhere. The Supervision Department in the Ministry of Education or the related Educational Directorate will hold a short in-service training course on teacher evaluation for these teachers, to be followed by a standardised competence-performance test, which will determine whether they should be appointed as unit heads. The supervisor will continuously evaluate their performance and provide guidance on all matters. He will also arrange regular plenaries and workshops for all unit heads where they can exchange ideas.

The unit head will retain his duties as a teacher, but his teaching load will be reasonably reduced. Other incentives-financial benefits, etc.-could also be arranged. The title will remain subject to withdrawal to ensure that the work is not taken for granted, and that all teachers, novice and experienced, will have a chance to become a unit head.

The role of the unit head in the supervisory process will be developmental for the following reasons:

1. With only 10 or fewer teachers in his group, he will be able to observe his colleagues continuously.

2. As he will be working in the same environment as the teachers in his unit, and as he will have a close view of their personal characteristics, he will be aware of the situational and contextual factors influencing their teaching.

3. He will be able to establish a comfortable, intimate work environment, as the teachers will be familiar with him as a person. The teachers will not be intimidated, as is the usual case with a supervisor.

4. There will be immediate feedback from both sides: The unit head will point out positive or negative sides in a teacher's performance, suggesting remedies for the weak points. The teacher will be able to consult the unit head whenever he is in need of guidance about his teaching.

5. The unit head himself will surely benefit greatly from the experience, as he will have a chance to observe how other teachers teach and incorporate any bright approach or skill into his own teaching, as well as introducing them to other teachers.

The unit head will provide the supervisor with regular reports on his activities and inform him about any problems. Hence, the supervisor will have up-to-date knowledge about all teachers in his area. This will greatly help smooth the supervisor's work, as he will be sure that individual teachers' needs are catered to, while he himself can work on issues of a more general nature-e.g., arranging substantial in-service training programmes. This is not to say that the supervisor will become redundant in teacher supervision, nor will he be distanced from the teachers. It is just that he will leave much of the work at the micro level to his unit heads, and will devote more of his time to matters at a macro level. He will still observe individual teachers, but his assessment will be more effective, as he will have a personal report on each teacher prepared by the unit head. He will evaluate the progress and achievement of both the unit heads and the teachers, and guide the unit heads as to what more could be done to improve a certain teacher's performance. He will always ensure that the unit heads carry out their duties in a positive, collegial spirit.

In short, the unit head will be the missing link in the chain of supervision. The supervisor will know that when he observes a teacher in the class, the outcome will not be a mere semester report but work on the unit head's part to help that teacher overcome his problems in teaching. Help from the inside, as it were.

Conclusion

I once read in a newspaper an anecdote about an international conference on medicine where a surgeon from Bangladesh presented a paper on how he uses paper clips as a surgical instrument in some operations. Upon hearing this, a Japanese participant in the conference expressed surprise as to why paper clips should be used in operations when there are proper devices available. The Bengali surgeon retorted that Bangladesh simply did not have the money to buy those proper devices.

This is the case with countries with limited resources; we have to resort to other solutions and use what resources we have in the most efficient way. If we cannot employ a sufficient number of supervisors to cover the need, we will employ peer supervision to try and overcome the deficiencies of the system.

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